

If you want to know who's really making a difference in child survival today in Nepal, you probably don't have to go beyond the next village. That's because thousands of women in villages all over the country are advancing community health with their hard work and dedication every day. The efforts of the National Female Community Health Volunteers have contributed to stunning reductions in child mortality rates nationwide. In fact, the number of children who died before their fifth birthday was reduced by 42% in only ten years. Today - National Female Community Health Volunteer Day – provides an opportunity to honor the more than 48,000 active Volunteers whose sustained commitment saves so many children's lives.

Started in 1988 under the Ministry of Health with the support of USAID/Nepal and other key donors including UNFPA and UNICEF, the Female Community Health Volunteer program provides a short, 15-day basic training to village women. The women work on a volunteer basis to help educate other women and children in their communities about health matters and provide basic health services. Although they receive no salary, most Volunteers continue to serve as the direct link between health services and their communities year after year.

Volunteers contribute to increasing coverage of key health programs by bringing treatment closer to the family, reaching children in remote areas where families often critically delay seeking treatment. Programs such as family planning services, antenatal care for mothers, treatment of childhood diarrhea, regular childhood immunizations, and national polio immunization days all have a direct impact on child survival. Volunteers also provide oral re-hydration salts, condoms, pills, vitamin supplements and first aid.

The results have been nothing short of remarkable. Studies of the decline in childhood deaths in Nepal have shown that spread of the Vitamin A program over the years has gone hand-in-hand with the decrease in child deaths. Now that Vitamin A distribution covers all of Nepal, an estimated 12,000 – 15,000 children's lives are saved each year by this program alone.

As the program has developed, so has the Volunteers' capacity. And while initial worries focused on whether poorly educated village women would be able to diagnosis and provide medical treatment accurately, regular surveys of Volunteers have found that their level of knowledge and ability to correctly diagnosis and treat remains very high. In 2001/2002, Volunteers and other community health workers found and treated over 96,000 children with pneumonia. With good training and supervision, Volunteers are able to make accurate diagnoses of fatal illnesses such as pneumonia in the child's home and provide effective and

immediate treatment.

These are just a few examples of the community health programs that Volunteers promote that save thousands of children each year. Without the dedicated women of Nepal bringing treatment to their own communities Nepal's success in reducing deaths in children would have been impossible. USAID is confident that the role of Volunteers in community health will continue to expand in the future. Today we celebrate the Volunteers for their sustained commitment and extend our deepest thanks to them for their outstanding work.

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